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ABSTRACT

Learning communities are becoming important components of faculty teaching responsibilities. This study addresses faculty's perceptions of its role as learning community participants. A survey administered in December 1998 to faculty (n=67) at the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Central Florida focused on how they viewed participation generally, as well as anticipated benefits such as promotion, tenure, teaching awards, and performance evaluations. Responses to questions on whether learning community participation was good for a respondent's career showed significant variation across rank, with full professors showing the strongest agreement and instructors expressing he least agreement. There were also meaningful differences in race and gender; with white female assistant professors less likely to agree with the statement than white male assistant professors. In responding to questions about how onerous and demanding participation was in such courses, most faculty (with the exception of white male instructors) did not regard participation as overly difficult. The paper concluded that faculty perceptions of the benefits of participation in learning communities vary by rank, discipline, and years of experience, with faculty nearing retirement generally not as concerned with perceived benefits as younger and untenured faculty. Appended are five data tables and the questionnaire. (CH)

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Learning Communities and the Academic Career:

Perspectives on Faculty Participation

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Learning Communities and the Academic Career:
Perspectives on Faculty Participation

Learning communities are becoming increasingly important components of faculty teaching responsibilities. Directives regarding the infusion of learning communities as a more integral part of the curriculum are trickling down from higher levels of academic administration to faculty who are being encouraged to participate. The study reported here addresses faculty perception of learning community participation as a way to gauge faculty enthusiasm, concerns and anticipated costs and benefit of participation. Faculty serve as intermediaries between the goals set by academic administrators and student experiences. This is a dual role for faculty who then serve as teachers within their area of expertise as well as implementers of administrative initiatives. Understanding faculty perceptions of this role sheds light on a wide array of opinions and attitudes held by what is arguably the population most critical for the success of learning community initiatives.

Questions regarding faculty perception of learning communities participation were addressed by developing, administering and analyzing the results of a survey of the faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Central Florida. The survey queried respondents regarding whether they were or anticipated participating in learning communities, their perceptions of the costs and benefits of learning communities in terms of their own academic careers, and their perceptions of participation incentives. Characteristics such as rank, time in rank, discipline, gender, race, amount of teaching experience and average class size were included in the survey as well.

The survey was administered during December 1998. Every faculty member in the College of Arts and Sciences (N=400) was sent a self-administered questionnaire (See Appendix I). Faculty were asked to return the survey within six weeks of receipt, which was three weeks into the Spring 1999 semester. A pre-addressed envelope was included with the questionnaire to ease its return. Only 67 surveys were returned thereby compromising the study's generalizability.

The population responding indicates that faculty participation in learning communities is low. One fourth of those responding noted that they were either teaching in the program or had taught in the program. An additional 25% indicated that they planned to participate in learning communities even though they had not yet done so. Fully one-half of the respondents had no plans to participate in the LINC program. These results suggest that faculty in the college perceive that their participation is not worthwhile.

The responses reveal various preferences and important opinion dynamics that are worth noting. We sought to understand how individuals from various career stages viewed the learning communities experience and their own participation in it. The results may also indicate a perceived additional burden for increasing numbers of female and minority hires who are seeking tenure. Actual and anticipated benefits of learning community participation may be tied to

promotion and tenure issues thereby creating disincentives for senior faculty. Alternately, senior faculty who are less concerned with research productivity at advanced stages of their careers may be more supportive of learning communities and more enthusiastic about participation.

In addressing these issues, we focus on faculty perception of tangible benefits for themselves (the benefits to students were addressed in other parts of the survey). Five questions included in the questionnaire focused on general views toward participation as well as anticipated benefits such as promotion and tenure, teaching awards and performance evaluations. Each of these questions was presented as a statement. The questionnaire included a five point scale, where strongly agree and strongly disagree constituted the two ends of the continuum. Faculty were asked to circle which number (5=Strongly Agree, 1=Strongly Disagree) mostly closely reflected their own point of view. We believe that the opinions expressed in response to these questions provide an array of perspectives that gives specific focus to faculty, rather than student or administrative issues.

The first question analyzed was a general statement regarding whether learning communities participation was good for the respondent's career (See Table 1). There was significant and meaningful variation across categories of rank, gender and race. For example, full professors express the strongest agreement with this view (Average score=3.57) whereas instructors express the strongest disagreement (Average score=1.67). The discrepancy between responses may be tied to the assignment of LINC courses. Instructors may find that one or more LINC courses in a given term will not help them professionally while at that rank. The belief that student evaluations may suffer, or that preparation and evaluation time may be significantly increased, may cause one to assert that participation is not good for one's career because attention to other job related functions, such as other courses, may suffer.

Table 1 About Here

There were also meaningful differences in different race and gender categories. White female assistant professors were less prone to agree with this statement (Average=2.80) than were white male assistant professors (Average=3.14) whereas white women at the associate professor rank were more inclined to agree with this statement than their male counterparts at that rank (Average 1.75 versus 3.13). These opinion differences may be tied to gender stereotypes where women are perceived as more concerned with, and more capable of, quality teaching. Males are perceived as being more attentive to their research productivity. Thus, tenured women at the associate rank may be more inclined to see an opportunity to expand their teaching techniques and applications as beneficial to their careers, now that they have achieved tenure, than are similarly situated males.

A second general question was raised that gauged opinion through a negative statement rather than a positive statement as the one described above. Faculty were asked to respond to a statement regarding whether LINC participation efforts were onerous and demanding (See Table 2). Reactions were generally in disagreement save for white male instructors (Overall average

2.61 versus 4.67 for white male instructors). White respondents who had reached associate or full status demonstrated minimal gender differences. Across rank comparisons were also quite close. These reactions may be similar because so many faculty have not yet participated in learning communities or their first experience may have been difficult. Therefore, the perception that their participation may be helpful in their overall career goals is not incongruent with these results.

Table 2 About Here

Respondents tended to agree with the statement associating strong teaching evaluations with learning communities by a small margin above the midpoint of the overall mean (Average=3.22) (See Table 3). The difference between white males and white females tended to change on this question once the associate professor rank was reached. White male instructors and assistant professors were more likely to agree (Average=3.00 and 3.71, respectively) than white female instructors and assistant professors (Average=2.80 and 3.20, respectively). However, at the associate and full professor rank, white females (Average=3.00 and 3.50, respectively) agreed more than white males (Average=2.50 and 3.09, respectively). Instructors ranked the lowest overall (Average=3.00).

Table 3 About Here

These results may reflect instructors' general perceptions that learning community participation will not help their career. The results indicate that faculty members are neutral on this issue (the average is close to "3", the midpoint of the range). Perhaps as more faculty are exposed to the learning communities program, participate in the program, or hear about the experience from their colleagues, these views will take on more intensity in one or the other direction.

Instructors also showed the least agreement with the statement "participation in learning communities will contribute to my tenure and/or promotion goals" (Average=2.22) (See Table 4). Full professors agreed the most (Average=3.86). There was a noticeable change between white male assistant professors (Average=3.86) and white male associate professors (Average=2.00). These results may reveal the perception that achieving tenure and promotion to associate professor requires a strong teaching record coupled with a good beginning on one's research agenda. By contrast, promotion to full professor is often viewed as one where research productivity provides the core component of one's evaluative materials.

Table 4 About Here

Instructors were also least likely to believe that learning communities would help them to receive teaching awards (See Table 5). Of all the positive statements discussed, this one had the lowest overall score (Average=2.73). There were no significant gender differences to this question but whites tended to agree more than non-whites. Instructors may believe that, while

they are eligible to compete for teaching awards, the opportunities for rounding out their teaching dossiers beyond classroom teaching are limited. Normally, instructors at UCF do not serve on committees outside of their own department, serve on thesis committees such as Honors or Masters, or teach a wide range of courses such as honors or upper division. These results may reflect the perception that winning teaching awards, despite meeting eligibility requirements, is beyond the realm of most instructors.

Table 5 About Here

Associate professors ranked lower than assistant and full professors on all the positively phrased questions except for the teaching awards question where they ranked the highest. Associate professors are also the most likely to find learning community efforts onerous and demanding. Perhaps associate professors are at a point in their careers where they are more appreciative of teaching awards because of the professional recognition that they bring. The tenure and promotion process, while arduous, is also very private. Teaching awards provide public recognition for hard work and classroom teaching efforts.

The results of this study suggest that one of the clear barriers to building faculty support for learning communities is the general lack of enthusiasm for such programs. At the University of Central Florida, the Learning Communities program is in its infancy. Building and nurturing faculty commitment may be tied to encouraging participation. One other indication that ignorance of the LINC program, rather than opposition to it, provides the greatest obstacle to fostering faculty commitment is that so few faculty opted to participate in the survey on which this paper is based. The opportunity to express one's opinion on an initiative in which so many faculty could conceivably participate was not taken. This suggests ignorance expressed as neutrality rather than nonparticipation indicating opposition.

Universities continue developing mechanisms that encourage faculty participation in learning communities. These include shifting teaching responsibilities, assignment of student assistants for teaching and research, and participation in faculty development workshops. These incentives, as well as what faculty members might expect from their participation such as stronger teaching evaluations and the increased likelihood of receiving teaching awards (such as the State of Florida's highly competitive TIP program), might encourage faculty participation in learning communities. The present stage of LINC development at the University of Central Florida indicates that faculty participation and exposure may foster enthusiasm once learning curves, such as coordinating courses with other faculty, are worked out.

These results reveal in both a general and meaningful way that faculty perceptions are representative across the board in terms of rank, discipline or years of experience. For example, faculty nearing retirement will not likely be concerned with either tenure or promotion whereas untenured faculty may feel pressed to participate because of the incentives associated with it. Teaching in a learning community was perceived as a vehicle for strengthening one's tenure and promotion file.

It has also been argued that faculty who participate in learning communities might develop research collaboration opportunities. Research and publication outside or in addition to one's field, such as interdisciplinarity, may be perceived as less important than research founded exclusively in one's own discipline. These concerns may dissuade faculty from participating unless it is deemed necessary for achieving other goals.

By contrast to these perceptions, the benefits enjoyed by students in learning communities are far reaching. Universities employ various mechanisms to incorporate learning communities into course offerings such as developing learning communities that include enrollment in required courses as well as easing the registration process for students opting to participate. Student perceptions have been gauged as learning communities administrators refine their implementation strategies.

Further investigations tied to faculty perceptions are critical for developing policy prescriptions to achieve faculty enthusiasm for learning communities. For example, a look at outcome indicators such as teaching evaluations, LINC participation rates across ranks, research collaboration among LINC faculty, exit interviews or surveys administered to students and the number of times individual faculty participate in learning communities will individually and collectively provide important information on those factors contributing to the presence or absence of faculty desire to participate in such programs. In so doing, beliefs about the benefits and utility of learning communities can be gauged, reacted to by other faculty, administrators and students, and acted on.

Table 1 Faculty Perceptions by Rank, Race and Gender:
"Participating in the LINC program is good for my career."

	Rank				
	Instructor	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Full Professor	All Ranks
White Males	1.67	3.14	1.75	3.55	2.92
N=	3	7	4	11	25
White Females	2.60	2.80	3.13	3.00	2.88
N=	5	10	8	2	25
Non-white Males	N/A	N/A	3.50	5.00	4.00
N=	N/A	N/A	2	1	3
Non-white Females	N/A	2.00	2.00	N/A	2.00
N=	N/A	5	2	N/A	7
All=	2.11	2.79	2.76	3.57	2.86
N=	8	22	16	14	60

Table 2 Faculty Perceptions by Rank, Race and Gender: "The efforts required for faculty participation in learning communities is onerous and demanding."

	Rank				
	Instructor	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Full Professor	All Ranks
White Males	4.67	2.17	2.75	2.55	2.75
N=	3	6	4	11	24
White Females	1.60	3.00	2.88	2.50	2.63
N=	5	9	8	2	24
Non-white Males	N/A	N/A	1.50	2.00	1.67
N=	N/A	N/A	2	1	3
Non-white Females	N/A	2.80	3.00	N/A	2.86
N=	N/A	5	2	N/A	7
All=	2.67	2.59	2.71	2.50	2.61
N=	8	20	16	14	58

Table 3 Faculty Perceptions by Rank, Race and Gender:
"Faculty who participate in learning communities are more likely to receive stronger teaching evaluations than they would otherwise."

	Rank				
	Instructor	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Full Professor	All Ranks
White Males	3.00	3.71	2.50	3.09	3.16
N=	3	7	4	11	25
White Females	2.80	3.20	3.00	3.50	3.08
N=	5	10	8	2	25
Non-white Males	N/A	N/A	4.00	5.00	4.33
N=	N/A	N/A	2	1	3
Non-white Females	N/A	3.25	3.50	N/A	3.33
N=	N/A	4	2	N/A	6
All=	3.00	3.39	3.06	3.29	3.22
N=	8	21	16	14	59

Table 4 Faculty Perceptions by Rank, Race and Gender: "Participation in learning communities will contribute to my tenure and/or promotion goals."

	Rank				
	Instructor	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Full Professor	All Ranks
White Males	2.00	3.86	2.00	3.82	3.32
N=	3	7	4	11	25
White Females	2.60	3.20	3.25	3.50	3.12
N=	5	10	8	2	25
Non-white Males	N/A	N/A	4.00	5.00	4.33
N=	N/A	N/A	2	1	3
Non-white Females	N/A	2.20	2.00	N/A	2.14
N=	N/A	5	2	N/A	7
All=	2.22	3.29	3.00	3.86	3.19
N=	8	22	16	14	60

Table 5 Faculty Perceptions by Rank, Race and Gender: "Participating in learning communities will increase my chances of receiving teaching awards such as TIP or 'Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching'"

	Rank				
	Instructor	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Full Professor	All Ranks
White Males	2.67	2.71	2.75	2.82	2.76
N=	3	7	4	11	25
White Females	2.50	2.50	3.13	3.00	2.75
N=	4	10	8	2	24
Non-white Males	N/A	N/A	3.50	1.00	2.67
N=	N/A	N/A	2	1	3
Non-white Females	N/A	2.50	3.00	N/A	2.67
N=	N/A	4	2	N/A	6
All=	2.38	2.65	3.00	2.71	2.73
N=	7	21	16	14	58

Appendix I-Questionnaire (with Responses Added)

% Responding

1. Which of the following statements best describe your participation in learning communities (check all that apply)?*

8 A) I have taught in the LINC program during 1998.
3 B) I am teaching in the LINC program during Spring 1999.
28 C) I **plan** to teach in the LINC program sometime in the future.
49 D) I have **no plans** to teach in the LINC program in the future.

* **Note:** Multiple responses were allowed and are not reflected here. Totals do not add to 100%.

2. Please check all that apply:*

21 A) I have participated in **short term** Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning activities such as ½ day workshops.
32 B) I plan to participate in **short term** Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning activities such as ½ day workshops.
31 C) I have no plans to participate in **short term** Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning activities.

* **Note:** Multiple responses were allowed and are not reflected here. Totals do not add to 100%.

3. Please check all that apply:*

11 A) I have participated in **long term** Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning activities such as the Faculty Development Seminar or Midwinter Faculty Development Seminar.
19 B) I plan to participate in **long term** Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning activities such as the Faculty Development Seminar or Midwinter Faculty Development Seminar.
58 C) I have no plans to participate in **long term** Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning activities.

* **Note:** Multiple responses were allowed and are not reflected here. Totals do not add to 100%.

Please respond to each of the following 11 statements using a 1-5 scale by circling the appropriate response (1=Strongly Agree, 5=Strongly Disagree).

Average Score:

4. Participating in the LINC program is good for my career. 2.86

5. Participating in learning communities encourages faculty interaction across departments.	2.03
6. Students who participate in learning communities experience a better learning environment than those students not involved in LINC programs.	2.59
7. Participating in learning communities fosters faculty research collaboration opportunities.	2.72
8. Faculty who participate in learning communities are more likely to receive stronger teaching evaluations than they would otherwise.	3.22
9. The efforts required for faculty participation in learning communities is onerous and demanding.	2.61
10. Participating in learning communities requires that I alter my course content significantly.	2.70
11. Participation in learning communities will contribute to my tenure and/or promotion goals.	3.19
12. Participating in learning communities will increase my chances of receiving teaching awards such as TIP or "Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching".	2.73
13. Teaching a LINC course requires additional effort when compared with the same course not offered in a LINC format.	2.05
14. Participation in learning communities allows me to enrich the content of my course.	2.34

15. Which of the following benefits would most likely encourage **you** to participate in learning communities? Check all that apply. Also, **please circle your preferred benefit**.

% Selecting

52	a) graduate research assistant
45	b) travel monies
58	c) expense monies (e.g. for software or books)
72	d) course reduction
31	e) money given to my home department
43	f) equipment
67	g) stipend
5	h) other (please specify)
6	i) none

16. Incentives offered to faculty by the College of Arts and Sciences for their participation in LINC should include:

54	a) graduate research assistant
46	b) travel monies
55	c) expense monies (for software, books, etc.)
61	d) course reduction
42	e) money given to my home department
36	f) equipment
57	g) stipend
8	h) other (please specify)
6	i) none

17. My rank is (Please circle) Instructor Asst. Professor Assoc. Professor Professor

% Selecting:	14	39	26	21

18. How many years have you been teaching at UCF full time (Please circle the appropriate response)?

	a) 0	b) 1	c) 2	d) 3	e)4	f) 5	g) 6-9	h) 10-14	i) 15-19	j) 20+
%=	5	9	14	9	11	5	12	8	9	20

19. How many years full time teaching experience did you have **prior to coming** to UCF?

	a) 0	b) 1	c) 2	d) 3	e) 4	f) 5	g) 6-9	h) 10-14	i) 15-19	j) 20+
%=	37	11	12	8	8	3	6	11	3	2

20. Which of the following categories best describes your race/ethnicity?

% Selecting		% Selecting	
2	a) African-American	84	d) Caucasian
2	b) Hispanic	2	e) Native American
7	c) Asian	5	f) Multiracial

21. My gender is (Please circle): a) Female b) Male

%=	54	46

Discipline:

	% of Respondents
Biology/Chemistry/Physics	13
Communication/Film	8
English	21
Foreign Languages and Literatures	2
History	3
Math/Statistics/Computer Science	15
Music/Theatre	18
Philosophy/Humanities	3
Psychology/Sociology-Anthropology/ Political Science	18
	101%

Note: Error due to rounding.